

Defining the History of Bitlis' Urban Development Through the Memories of Travelers

Gezginlerin Anıları Üzerinden Bitlis'in Kentsel Gelişim Tarihinin Tanımlanması

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the historical and spatial evolution of Bitlis, a province in Eastern Anatolia, through the narratives, maps, and visual records of travelers who visited it over the centuries. It examines how these textual and visual accounts act as cultural representations that reflect—and in turn shape—the province's urban memory and morphology. By analyzing the relational dynamics between geography, architecture, and social life, the paper traces how Bitlis' urban macroform evolved across different historical periods. The research adopts a qualitative approach, combining historical cartography, travelers' interpretations, and urban mapping techniques. The findings indicate that the urban form of Bitlis was shaped primarily by its topographical setting, stream network, strategic location on regional trade routes, and the presence of Bitlis Castle as the historical core of the settlement. Travelers' narratives and historical maps reveal a notable continuity in the relationship between topography and urban development across different periods. The city expanded along the valleys defined by the stream system, producing a distinctive star shaped macroform that remained recognizable despite demographic, political, and economic transformations. The study contributes to a better understanding of the historical morphology and spatial development of Bitlis.

Keywords: Bitlis, urban morphology, travelers' narratives, cultural geography, spatial development, historical urban form.

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Doğu Anadolu'da yer alan Bitlis kentinin tarihsel ve mekânsal evrimini, yüzyıllar boyunca kenti ziyaret eden gezginlerin anlatıları, haritaları ve görsel kayıtları üzerinden incelemektedir. Metin ve görsel nitelikteki bu kaynakların, kentin kentsel belleğini ve morfolojisini yansıtan—ve aynı zamanda şekillendiren—kültürel temsiller olarak nasıl işlev gördüğü ele alınmaktadır. Coğrafya, mimari ve toplumsal yaşam arasındaki ilişkisel dinamikleri analiz eden çalışma, Bitlis'in kentsel makroformunun farklı tarihsel dönemlerde nasıl evrildiğini izlemektedir. Araştırma, tarihsel kartografya, gezgin yorumları ve kentsel haritalama tekniklerini bir araya getiren nitel bir yaklaşım benimsemektedir. Bulgular, Bitlis'in kentsel formunun öncelikle topoğrafik yapısı, dere ağı, bölgesel ticaret yolları üzerindeki stratejik konumu ve yerleşimin tarihsel çekirdeğini oluşturan Bitlis Kalesi tarafından şekillendirildiğini göstermektedir. Gezgin anlatıları ve tarihsel haritalar, farklı dönemler boyunca topoğrafya ile kentsel gelişim arasındaki ilişkinin büyük ölçüde süreklilik gösterdiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Kent, dere sisteminin tanımladığı vadiler boyunca gelişmiş ve demografik, siyasal ve ekonomik dönüşümlere rağmen karakterini koruyan özgün bir yıldız biçimli makroform oluşturmıştır. Çalışma, Bitlis'in tarihsel morfolojisi ve mekânsal gelişiminin daha iyi anlaşılmasına katkı sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bitlis, kentsel morfoloji, gezgin anlatıları, kültürel coğrafya, mekânsal gelişim, tarihsel kentsel form.

Introduction

Cities have undergone change and development in line with the needs of their inhabitants and their needs. Different cultures, different social and administrative structures and beliefs are reflected in the settlement patterns of cities and play a decisive role in the physical and sociological formation of the province. The development, shaping and changes in the form of cities are processes that take place under the influence of different dynamics such as geography, population, economy, security factors, mutual relations between different cities and actions in the urban area (Tezer, 2013).

The morphology of a province is formed in the historical process, takes its current form and continues to change and develop. The advantages and constraints of the geographical location, climatic conditions, the civilizations it has hosted, the skills of its inhabitants in building activities, religious and political vulnerabilities, and the visions formulated by the rulers for the province at the regional and national level determine the sociocultural as well as formal qualities of the province. Urban morphology research increasingly emphasizes the relationship between historical processes, spatial structure, and urban transformation, providing valuable tools for understanding the evolution of cities through time (Oliveira, 2016; Oliveira, 2021).

Cities, which have developed with different priorities throughout history, form organic forms under the influence of geographical conditions, the shape of spatial structures, the living habits of their inhabitants and the configuration of streets. For this reason, each settlement unit has its own morphology. The way in which the province morphology manifests itself started with the emergence of the first settlements and has been renewed in all subsequent periods due to different dynamics.

As cities or settlements have changed in the historical process, there have been differentiations in urban areas, structural texture and property patterns. Urban areas are complex and variable systems. They change and transform under the influence of physical, social, natural, economic or ideological factors, and their own internal dynamics can cause many transformations. Changes and transformations in the province sometimes take place in a way that improves the quality of space, while at other times they may lead to socio-economic and ecological deterioration (Akkar Ercan, 2006).

While some of the changes in urban centers cover very large areas, some of them have taken place at the scale of a single building island or a single parcel. These changes take place in parts and are realized in the form of demolition and reconstruction of buildings on a single parcel, changes in building island shapes and building heights, changes in parcel sizes or the type of construction (Tüter & Ökesli, 2015). However, the whole or certain parts of the cities have been experiencing social and economic decline based on migration movements and related demographic changes in the historical process. This deterioration is not only the physical obsolescence of certain buildings or groups of buildings. These areas are also areas where cultural deficiencies emerge (Erdoğan et al., 2004).

Population growth in cities also causes changes. Population growth is not only an expression of change and transformation in the economic, social and cultural structure, but also an expression of the continuous growth of the physical space and boundaries of the province. A significant concentration of population in a region or a significant emptying of a region finds its reflection in physical spaces. As a result of such demographic movements, either province-specific spatial forms are formed, or existing original spaces disappear.

The traditional cities of Anatolia can also be described as organically textured settlements formed by citizens self-organizing themselves, based on their habits, culture of life and historical geography, without any sanctions based on different ethnic and religious characteristics. In many of these cities, the influences and traces of Seljuk and Ottoman civilizations can be clearly read in the organization of the urban fabric.

In the Republican period, the factors influential in the formation and expansion of urban spaces were differentiated with the impact of the industrialization process dating back to the 20th century. With the developments in construction, transportation and communication technologies and new forms of production, changes and transformations were experienced in the spatial organization between cities. In parallel with this process, some urban functions started to be located outside the boundaries of the province center. Moreover, this new form of growth, which is characterized by disconnected settlement patterns without continuity and integrity, with unused areas between urban aggregates, has been called 'urban fringing' (Tezer, 2013).

In this study, the characteristics of urban form and urban history overlapped. The sample area for the study is the province of Bitlis, which is located between the Southeastern Taurus Mountains. The development of the urban form of Bitlis in the historical process was examined through maps, associated with the physical, social, economic and historical characteristics of the province, and the characteristics of the urban form were revealed in relation to the narratives, drawings and maps of the travelers who came to the province over the centuries. In this respect, the study contributes to contemporary urban morphology research by combining historical cartography, travelers' narratives, and visual documentation to interpret long term spatial development.

The two most important geographical elements that enable the formation of the urban structure of Bitlis are topography and streams. The hills, which are the result of topography, and the coastline defined by the streams play a decisive role in the formation of urban morphology. Hills, streams, narrow plains and coastlines have not only been effective in the formation of settlements, but also in the formation of routes and connection points in the province.

The spatial development of cities in the historical process can be analyzed by considering certain periods. Thus, it can be determined how much area cities have occupied in which periods and how far their spatial boundaries have reached. However, in terms of spatial development, it is important to know which period intervals will be considered and on what grounds (Dinç & Karagel, 2017). While determining the periods related to the urban development of Bitlis, focusing more on the events that allowed the province to grow and expand or caused spatial contraction allowed more accurate inferences to be obtained.

The spatial development of a settlement depends on a certain amount of population. As the population increases, the province develops horizontally where geographical conditions allow it to do so, and vertically where they hinder it. It is known that natural disasters, epidemics, famines, migrations and wars have occurred in Bitlis throughout history, resulting in significant population losses. However, despite this, the province has preserved its existence as a continuously inhabited area until today.

The aim of this study is to examine the historical urban development of Bitlis through travelers' narratives, historical maps, engravings, and visual records produced between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. By analyzing these sources together, the study seeks to identify the spatial characteristics of the city, trace changes in its urban form over time, and evaluate the influence of geographical, socio-economic, and political factors on its development. In this context, the research contributes to the understanding of Bitlis' urban history from a morphological perspective while demonstrating the value of travel accounts as complementary historical sources.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical research approach. The primary sources consist of travelers' narratives, historical maps, engravings, and visual records produced between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. The selected travelers were chosen based on the availability of detailed observations concerning the physical structure, architecture, topography, and social life of Bitlis. These textual and visual sources were comparatively analyzed to identify recurring spatial characteristics and changes in the urban form of the city over time. Historical maps and visual materials were used to support and verify the descriptions provided in the travel accounts. Through this approach, the study reconstructs the historical development of Bitlis and evaluates the relationship between urban morphology and geographical context.

Location and historical background

The province of Bitlis was founded at an altitude of 1400-1450 m. above sea level on a valley narrowed by the Southeastern Taurus Mountains separating Eastern Anatolia from Southeastern Anatolia. Bitlis, which was established in this narrow and deep valley opened by the Bitlis stream between the Southeastern Taurus Mountains, has been the route of trade caravans since ancient times due to its location on the road connecting the plains of Al-Jazîrea to the central plateaus of Eastern Anatolia, from there to Iran and the Caucasus and crossing the Southeastern Taurus Mountains, and the masses of people making seasonal migrations in the north-south direction with their herds had to pass through this natural corridor (Tuncel, 1992).

Bitlis Castle, which controls this important pass, was built on a narrow ridge between the Bitlis Stream to the west of today's province and the K  m  s Stream, a tributary of this stream from the west. In addition, K  m  s, Rahva, Hersan and Saray streams, which continue as tributaries of Bitlis Stream, come from different points and merge at the location where the province was founded. It is possible to observe that the neighborhoods that formed the province developed along the axes formed by the streams (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Trade Routes in Anatolia in the Seljuk Period (left) (URL-3) Caravan routes at Bitlis region (right) (Kayahan, 2020)



Bitlis, which has been called by different names throughout history, has been called "Bit-Liz, Bad-lis or Bad-Lais" during the periods when it hosted many civilizations and civilizations. "Bit" means homeland in Assyrian language, and the word "Bet" was used in the meaning of castle. While Bit-Liz means the homeland of Liz, Bet-Lis means the castle of Liz (Okumuş, 2008).

Since the province of Bitlis is one of the oldest settlements in the region, the first historical documents about the province appear in written sources from the Assyrian period (Memiş, 1989). In these sources, Bitlis and Bitlis Castle, which has a strategic importance due to its location, are mentioned and it is seen that Bitlis was named Vaisis in 714 BC. Bitlis, which remained under the rule of the Urartians until the 11th century BC, continued its existence under the Assyrians in the 7th century and the Medes in

the 6th century. It is thought that it was later captured by Darius II with the establishment of the Persian Kingdom (S  mer, 1987). Bitlis, which came under the rule of Macedonian King Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC, was captured by the Eastern Roman Emperor Trajan in the 2nd century AD and continued to maintain its sovereignty under Byzantine rule until the 7th century AD.

In the 4th century, Bitlis, where Armenian principalities and principalities ruled, is also an important region in terms of Armenian history (Darkot, 1979). In 641, Bitlis came under the rule of the Muslims and later came under the rule of the Umayyads and Abbasids. In 1047, it came under the rule of the Seljuks, and in 1084-1085 it came under the rule of the Great Seljuk Empire (Ertaş, 2017).

Bitlis, which became an important destination during the Anatolian raids of the Turks that started in the 11th century, played an important role in the opening of the Turks to Anatolia due to its location. In 1230, the Seljuk Sultan Alaeddin Keykubat I included Bitlis in the Seljuk lands. Subsequently, the sovereignty, which changed hands between Eyyubi, Karakoyunlu, Akkoyunlu, Timur and Safavid states respectively, was under the control of a family named Şerefhanlar during this long period (Tuğlacı, 1985). Most of the monumental architectural works in Bitlis, which has been home to many different civilizations, date back to the Seljuk period.

Due to the tribal structure in Eastern Anatolia, it is known that a different administrative structuring system was established in Bitlis, which came under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. After Bitlis came under Ottoman rule, it was attached to the governorship of Diyarbakır with a special status under the name of sanjak and government and was ruled by Şeref Han from the Şerefhanog  lları family who ruled in Bitlis in 1527 (Inbaşı, 2010).

The administrators of Bitlis were not loyal to the Ottoman Empire for a long time due to their desire to join Iran from time to time. The ruler of Bitlis, Şeref Khan IV, who was loyal to the Ottoman Empire during the reign of Yavuz Sultan Selim II, left the Ottoman allegiance during the reign of Kanuni and became a protectorate of Iran. The failure of the first attempt to recapture Bitlis led Kanuni to organize an expedition to Eastern Anatolia (Tuncel, 1992). The Ottomans were victorious in this expedition organized in 1533, and Bitlis was definitively annexed to the Ottoman lands when Şeref Khan IV was replaced by Şemseddin III after his death. Bitlis, which was an "kaza" under Muş Sanjak during the Principalities Period, was turned into a provincial center on December 1, 1878 after the Ottoman-Russian War.

The province of Bitlis was established in the Bitlis Stream Valley, which is connected to the Tigris River drainage network that cuts through the Southeastern Taurus Mountains (Figure 2) This valley is a natural passage that makes it easy to cross the mountainous mass. The Bitlis Stream Valley, which lies between the Al Jazira Plains and the Lake Van Basin, is known as the Urartu-Assyrian Road, the Trade-Mining Road or the Bend-   Mahi Road at various stages of human history (Belli, 1977).

It is known that commercial life along the Lake Van basin continued uninterruptedly for centuries. It is possible to trace the history of the transportation network developed around the lake back to the Urartian period (Belli, 1977). The road axis, which continued its development during the transportation of the materials of rich mineral deposits and obsidian resources, valuables and foods specific to the region, played an important role especially in the formation and development of the province of Bitlis. Thanks to commercial activities, travelers, caravans,

travelers, merchants and pilgrims who came from the south in the direction of Diyarbakır and wanted to pass through Van to Iran and the Caucasus, or vice versa, made this journey by passing through Bitlis. The historical roads known to have been in use around the 10th century were shaped around the Lake Van basin. One of the three major known road axes was the so-called southwestern road, which passed through Tatvan, Bitlis, Silvan, Amid and descended to Çukurova and the Persian Gulf. The second axis, the northern route following Ahlat, Hınıs and Erzurum, led to Georgia via Trabzon. The third axis, the Van, Godor, Her, Tabriz route, reached India (Kılıç, 2019). This road route, which was shaped around Lake Van, had an important transportation network within the borders of today's Bitlis (Başbaydar Belli & Urfalıoğlu, 2023).

Figure 2.
Bitlis and its environs (URL-1)



The urban environment of old bitlis from the eyes of travelers

The province of Bitlis was founded in the location where the valley in question gains the greatest width. Kömüs (İskender), Rahva, Hersan and Saray (Altınkalbur) streams, which come from different directions, merge in the province of Bitlis to form a star shape and then flow towards the south, taking the name Bitlis Stream. Thus, since it forms a very suitable area for settlement between the mountains, the province of Bitlis has conformed to this shape in its outlines and has gained a star form, which is unique in the world. The valley network in question was filled up to certain levels with lava and pyroclastic rocks that flowed from Nemrut volcano to Baykan, and then this guest volcanic origin material was split again by rivers. As a result, volcanic cornices (terraces) were formed within the valleys, on which 10 of the province's 12 neighborhoods are located. Bitlis Castle was built on an erosion-protected volcanic rise between the Kömüs (İskender Stream) and Rahva Stream. Since the valley floor around Bitlis Castle was wide, the province's trade area, called the bazaar, was also located in this section (Arıncı, 1995).

Travelers set out for different purposes throughout history and provided valuable information about the places they visited. Travelers not only describe the places they visited, but also provide information about the political, religious, social, economic, architectural, cultural and demographic structure of those places. This information enriches our historical and cultural understanding and helps to understand the past.

The different perspectives of the travelers while providing information about the places they visited can help us understand the political and cultural context of that period. In addition, their comparisons with the observations and information of other travelers who visited the places they visited before them help us understand the changes and interactions in that period.

The information provided by travelers is an important source for historical research, and through these sources we can gain a more in-depth knowledge about the social, cultural and political structures of past periods. In addition, the architectural works that travelers observe in the places they visit help us understand the historical heritage by reflecting the artistic and engineering understanding of that period.

The province of Bitlis, which has thousands of years of history, has hosted many travelers throughout the ages. The geography of Mesopotamia, where these three cities are located, has attracted the attention of hundreds of travelers from both the West and the East, and the region has been visited for centuries. Bitlis and its surroundings, which have managed to melt different ethnic groups, different religions and different cultures under the same pot, have been frequented by western travelers with this feature.

There are not enough sources to make a holistic assessment of the physical condition of Bitlis in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. However, the province was a stopping point for many travelers in these centuries. The narratives of the travelers and the engravings and miniatures drawn give the opportunity to have an idea about the physical condition of the province at that time. The miniature of Bitlis drawn by Matrakçı Nasuh as one of the stops on the route during the Sefer-i İraqeyn constitutes the oldest image of the province in the 16th century.

The work, whose full title is *Beyân-ı Menâzil-i Sefer-i Irâkeyn-i Sultan Süleyman Han*, is the part of Matrakçı Nasuh's history of the reign of Kanûnî (Süleymanname) that deals with the first Iranian campaign between 1533-1536. However, in his work, Matrakçı Nasuh turned his work into a "menzîlnâme" by making drawings of the ranges where people stayed and migrated during the Irâkeyn Expedition and writing the names of the ranges in the appropriate places of these drawings (Yurdaydın, 1963).

It is possible to define Matrakçı Nasuh as a historian who provided important geographical information through ranges and miniatures within his historical works. The geographical details of the depictions, the vegetation and the depiction of the spaces close to the realities of the period make the miniatures a valuable source for the history of urbanism and especially for the urbanism of the 16th century Near East, about which it is very difficult to find documents (Unat, 2016). In the depictions, the space is multidimensional, that is, it is not created from a single point of view. For example, dwellings, large religious buildings, bridges, walls, and even rivers and mountains are depicted from different perspectives. Although the depictions of the province are drawn from a bird's eye view, each architectural or natural element that makes up the province is depicted not only from a bird's eye view, but from time to time from the opposite, front or side, enhancing its expression with a multiperspective of perspectives (Özgül, 2012). Containing 107 miniatures and 25 illustrated texts, it is an important document consisting of 16th century province scapes and used as a primary source since it is the first of its time. Matrakçı Nasuh's work includes lifelike depictions of the topography, vegetation and architecture of Anatolian, Western Iranian and Iraqi cities and towns on the route of the expedition.

The province of Bitlis is in the narrow and deep valley formed by the Bitlis Stream between the Southeastern Taurus Mountains. In Matrakçı Nasuh's miniature depiction of the province, the buildings in the center of Bitlis are placed in the middle of the depiction, emphasizing the valley feature, while mountainous terrain on the right and left and steppes on these hills are depicted. In addition, mountainous terrain is depicted around and outside the city walls, and rivers flowing through Bitlis are shown.

The area shown above the inner castle at the top of the miniature is probably the Kömüş region of Bitlis, famous for its gardens and vineyards (Figure 3).

Figure 3.
Bitlis Miniature of Matrakçı Nasuh (Yurdaydın, 1963) and structures that can be identified



According to Matrakçı Nasuh's miniature, the castle consists of two parts, and in this context, it is possible to divide Bitlis Castle into inner and outer castles. When we come to the structures depicted by Matrakçı Nasuh outside the outer castle, apart from simple dwellings, there are three arched structures that are likely to be inns. As depicted in the miniature, it is not possible to speak of an outer castle that has survived to this day. Archaeological excavations and conservation work continue in the castle structure that is still standing. The Great Mosque, which is shown as one of the identifiable buildings of the province in Matrakçı Nasuh's miniature, is clearly the symbol of the province in the 16th century, even though it does not differ from the other buildings of Bitlis at first glance due to its rectangular plan and the materials used. Gelişkan (2015) also noted in the thesis that this was the case.

Built in 1528 by Serephan IV, the complex consists of a mosque, madrasah, imaret and tomb. When the complex is searched for in the miniature, it can be said that the mosque depicted by Nasuh belongs to the Şerefiye Mosque, the arched building in front of it belongs to the last congregation section, and the domed building in the back belongs to the tomb of the complex (Figure 3).

In the inner castle, houses that are drawn close to traditional residential architecture and do not have structurally specialized architectural elements are depicted, while two mosques, a külliye and a madrasah are depicted in the outer castle. It is also possible to say that the building drawn without windows is a bathhouse (Figure 3).

Although not included in Matrakçı Nasuh's miniature of Bitlis, there are some monumental buildings that date to the period of the campaign or before. These include the Red Mosque, the İhlasiye Madrasa and the Hüsrev Pasha Inn. The province also has many stone bridges that are still in use today. Matrakçı Nasuh did not show the streams running through the castle, nor did he depict any of the bridges over these streams.

Due to the realistic style of his depictions of the province, Matrakçı Nasuh depicted what he witnessed with his own eyes and what he remembered, in other words, the buildings that were

important for the province. In addition to these, there are depictions of vegetation, landforms and buildings that give a general impression of the architecture of the region (Kathryn et al., 2016). According to Tükel, what is important in miniatures are the monumental buildings and how these monumental buildings are in the province. However, especially in the miniature Bitlis, there is no depiction of any church building. Considering that a significant part of the province's population was Armenian at the time it was depicted, it can be thought that Matrakçı Nasuh ignored the churches (Tükel, 1990).

French merchant and traveler Jean Baptiste Tavernier's travel notes about Bitlis are the closest dated travel notes to Matrakçı Nasuh's miniature. Tavernier's impressions of Bitlis and its castle are as follows: "

"[...] On the way from Aleppo to Bitlis, when one approaches the province, one walks for a full day over steep and high mountains, which continue for two miles beyond the province. On both sides of the road there are either floodplains or mountains. The road is carved into the rocks, so in many places the camel or mule must tread very carefully to avoid falling into the water. The province is between two high mountains only a cannonball's throw away from each other; the castle is equidistant from both mountains. The hill is shaped like a candy cane and is so steep on all sides that it can only be climbed by turning around. Above it is a large plain and the castle is built on this plain; the entrance to the castle is provided by three bridges that go up and down. [...] The province extends to both mountains at the foot of the hill and has two caravanserais" (Tavernier, 2010).

In the 17th century, Evliya Çelebi was the only other traveler to give a comprehensive description of Bitlis. Evliya Çelebi, who traveled within the borders of the Ottoman Empire and narrated these travels in ten books, is the author of the book called *Seyahatname*, which is called the first and most important work of Turkish literature in the travel genre. Evliya Çelebi visited Bitlis three times between 1656 and 1666. Evliya Çelebi describes the province of Bitlis as being built between two high mountains equidistant from each other and draws its borders with Lake Van, Hakkâri, Diyarbakır, Mus Plain and Erzurum in the north (Dankoff, 1990).

Evliya Çelebi, on the other hand, says that Bitlis Castle is a solid structure built between Mount Dehdivan and Mount Avih, on a rock that extends its head towards the sky. He even mentions that the castle stands like an island between the rocky hill on which the castle is built and the two rivers between them. It is very difficult to reach the castle on the rock via the steep road and it takes six hundred steps to reach the gate of the castle. While describing the bazaars, markets and bedestens, he divides the province into two parts: the inner castle and the lower castle suburb (Kahraman & Dağlı, 2010). Evliya Çelebi also mentions many caves within the castle, which contain supplies and ammunition. There are no public buildings inside the castle other than the mosque, madrasah and grain collection center (Sevgen, 1959).

Among the mosques, he describes the Great Mosque as the oldest mosque in the province, on the banks of the Ayn-e İskender water flowing behind the castle, next to the bridge of the same stream. He then describes the small mosques and madrasas.

Evliya Çelebi mentions the Şerefiye mosque when describing the first-rank mosques of Bitlis with the sentence "The newly built Şeref Han Mosque in Çevkan Square is one of the most beautiful mosques of Bitlis." (Köhler, 2011).

Figure 4.
A scene from the town of Bitlis (Pietschmann, 1940)



Evliya Çelebi mentions eleven masonry bridges (Figure 4) over seventeen streams and says that on the right and left of these streams there are houses rising side by side with vineyards and gardens and that all these houses are masonry. He mentions that five thousand houses in seventeen neighborhoods built on the banks of seventeen streams were built in high and airy places (Kahraman & Dağlı, 2010). Çelebi mentions 9 caravanserais for travelers and merchants and gives Hatuniyye, Hüsrev Pasa and Serefhan caravanserais as examples. The names he uses to describe the neighborhoods coincide with Lynch's map.

Evliya Çelebi says that these houses, which are built against each other, are almost 5000 households and all of them are covered with amber-scented soil (Kahraman & Dağlı, 2010). Evliya Çelebi, while describing the cereal crops of Bitlis, said that there were no valleys and gardens to be cultivated and harvested since the province was located in a narrow and plateau in between high mountains, so there were vineyards everywhere (Kahraman & Dağlı, 2010).

Travelers who visited the province in different periods gave information about the social life, economy and architecture of the province. In this section, the accounts of travelers who visited the province in the 19th and 20th centuries will be presented.

In July 1836, Lieutenant Colonel J. Shiel's notes from his visit to Bitlis are analyzed. On July 26, Shiel started his excursions in the province and made positive observations about the center of Bitlis: "Bitlis has four caravanserais, three large and twelve small mosques, three baths, eight Armenian and one Nestorian church: each of the large mosques has a very tall minaret. It is a very beautiful sight to the eye, and these are said to be very old buildings. The number of butchers, bakeries, gun shops and silversmiths are very reasonable; there are about twenty of each. The most important production is coarse cotton cloth, and the most important export is tobacco. Pears, apples, plums, apricots, grapes, melons, cucumbers, lettuce, squash and other vegetables grow very well.

The province of Bitlis has a remarkable appearance: It is in a wide valley, open on the east but blocked by high mountains on the west. The houses are scattered on both steep slopes of the water flowing in this valley and on the neighboring hills. The structure of the province is, therefore, extremely irregular; the houses are built of red stone cut into square blocks, usually two stories high, with latticed windows facing the street. This is more reminiscent of houses in European towns than in Iran. As in Van,

the streets are paved with round stones. There are said to be 1,500 houses in the province, 500 of which belong to Armenians. Bakeries, butchers, greengrocers and similar shops belong to Armenians (Shiel, 1838).

British Nun Isabella L. Bird collected the notes of her trip in 1890 and the letters she wrote during this trip in a two-volume book titled "Travels in Persia and Kurdistan" published in 1891. This translation covers the accounts of Bitlis on pages 334-358 of the second volume of the book. The English nun in Bitlis on November 12, 1890 (Yigitler, 2018).

According to Bird, Bitlis is a land of waters, streams, streams, fountains, wells and springs, some with lots of iron, some with sulfur, some with water like Vichy water. This enormous, picturesque province has stacked houses, latticed windows, huge historical ruins, lush rivers, impressive bridges, terraced forested slopes and snow-capped mountains (Bird, 2010).

In his description of the province's architecture, Bird pays attention to features that reflect the spirit of the province: The houses are surrounded by high walls, with large courtyards and gardens that evoke a sense of awe. The garden gate of each house has iron supports, and the windows have iron bars. The height of the windows and the size of the houses suggest that the whole province is preparing for a siege. The houses appear to be built on top of each other (Bird, 2010).

There are 20 very old bridges in the province, each with a single arch. Some of the bridges and the castle are attributed to Alexander the Great, and the whole province is a museum of historical ruins.

According to Bird, Bitlis may seem a long way from the imperial center, but its location on one of the most important Ottoman trade routes made it an important center. Bird found the climate of Bitlis surprising, noting that the temperature in the province, which is 1,500 meters above sea level, rarely dropped below zero, but that snow fell in incredible quantities all the time. The snow would reach the height of the telegraph poles in Rahva and people would spend the entire winter trapped in their homes (Bird, 2010).

The province's ancient history and the geo-strategic importance of the geography on which it is located have been influential in making it a popular destination for some western travelers and researchers visiting Eastern Anatolia. For example, the merchant French travelers Tavernier, Shiel, Kinneir, consuls Brant and Taylor, Hommaire de Hell, Deyrolle, Müller Simonis and Hyvernats are a few of them. In the late 19th century, another western traveler who visited the province was the French geographer and orientalist Vital-Casimir Cuinet.

Vital-Casimir Cuinet's account of Bitlis in the late 1800s will be reviewed. In this context, it should be emphasized that Cuinet is best known for his work *La Turquie d'Asie, géographie administrative: statistique, descriptive et raisonnée de chaque province de l'Asie Mineure*, which deals with the socio-economic situation of the Ottoman Empire in Asia.

In 1891, Vital Cuinet prepared a reference book on the region, in which statistical data on the Armenians in the region were concentrated. In this publication, general geographical information about the province of Bitlis, military structure, form of government, climate, topography, natural vegetation, natural underground and surface resources, trade and industry, and population data are given in detail. There is no information on the urban fabric or architectural structure (Cuinet, 2001).

According to Vital Cuinet's analysis conducted in 1890 before World War I, approximately 39,000 people lived in eight thousand three hundred houses in the province of Bitlis (Cuinet, 2001). While 20,000 of the population was Muslim, 16,300 were Armenian (Köhler, 2011). The province was occupied by the Russians during the First World War, and with the deportation of Armenians, who constituted almost half of its population, in 1916, it entered the first years of the Republic as a tired and heavily damaged town consisting of only 4 neighborhoods named Tas, Zeydan, İnönü and Hersan, which had lost its former glory (Sayan & Öztürk, 2001).

In 1901, Lynch visited the region and provides information on the settlement characteristics, architecture, monumental structures, social structure and detailed population information of the Armenians living in Bitlis (Lynch, 1901). Lynch came to Bitlis and made a topographical map of the province. Lynch writes about the development of the province, stating that the province's position as a provincial center was due to its control of transportation routes and its strategically important position on the trade line. In addition, Lynch also mentions the province's commercial products and population. The data on the general characteristics and architecture of the province are as follows: He emphasizes that Bitlis has an important geographical location; the castle, located at the intersection of the valleys, has a prominent feature on the topographic map of the province and looks like a huge starfish. He mentions that the topography was effective in the settlement of the province and that the castle was surrounded by sparsely scattered houses; the houses were the best built in this part of Asia and had thick walls against extreme heat. The buildings were made of earthquake-resistant cut stone blocks.

Lynch states that Bitlis has the best examples of well-built houses (Figure 5.) and walls he has seen in this part of Asia. Lynch admired the quadrangular, cut stone madrasah -İhlasiye Madrasah- with 4 towers on each of its 4 corners in Gök Meydan and wrote that this building was used for military purposes in those days and that its façade was in Arabic style. Lynch said that Serefiye Mosque, one of the other monumental buildings in the province, was also in Arabic style and gave information about the churches and their congregations (Lynch, 1901).

Figure 5.
Lynch's engraving of Bitlis (Lynch, 1901)



FIG. 146. BITLIS FROM AVEL MEYDAN.

Lynch's information on the population is as follows:

"...the population of the province seems to have increased during this century. In 1814 the population was known to be

not much more than 12,000 (½ Muslim and the rest Armenian). In 1838 Brant calculated an increase in this number - 18,000: 2/3 Muslim and 1/3 Armenian. In 1868, Consul Taylor mentions 4 000 families: 1 500 Muslims and the rest Armenians. At the time of my visit to the province, the population was almost 30,000..." (Lynch, 1901).

When Lynch visited Bitlis, as he did in most of the places he visited, he drew a map showing the rough topography of the province. (Figure 6.) Through this visual material, the traveler conveys some information about some important buildings, squares, streets and neighborhoods that make up the physical structure of the province. Lynch states that the castle, which constitutes the nucleus of the province located at the junction of the valleys and dates to ancient times, resembles a giant starfish when viewed from a high point in the vicinity, and that the long antennae of this creature, represented by the valleys covered with houses, symbolize the thin and long body of the province (Kus, 2019). In parallel, Kinneir, who visited Bitlis at the beginning of the 19th century, physically likened the province to a crab. According to him, the body of the crab symbolizes the pleasant castle, one of the humid historical symbols of the province, while the pincers of the crab represent the valleys extending in different directions (Kinneir, 1818).

Figure 6.
Map of Bitlis drawn by Lynch (Lynch, 1901)



Indeed, the historical urban fabric of the province consists of an imposing castle rising in the center of the province and attracting attention from all sides, the main road and stream passing through the slope of the castle, and the stone houses settled on the slopes on the side of the road.

When compared with the earlier observations of Matrakçı Nasuh, Tavernier, and Evliya Çelebi, Lynch's descriptions indicate a notable degree of continuity in the overall urban structure of Bitlis. Throughout these accounts, the castle remained the dominant landmark, while the settlement continued to develop along the valleys defined by the stream network. Although demographic, political, and economic conditions changed over time, the influence of topography on the spatial organization of the city appears to have persisted. These observations suggest that the geographical setting of Bitlis played a significant role in shaping and maintaining its urban form across different historical periods.

If historical documents are analysed, it is understood that the development of the province of Bitlis continued in the following years. Because the number of neighbourhoods, which was reported to be 17 by Evliya Celebi in 1655, increased towards the end of the same century and the number of neighbourhoods reached 23 (Arınç, 2011) (Figure 7).

Figure 7.
Neighborhood Distribution in Bitlis. Source: Payaşı Oğuz (2011).



The existence of the Bitlis Emirate, which had partial autonomy, was terminated in 1847 due to its violation of the Ottoman State administrative system, and Bitlis was turned Bitlis

into an kaza under the Mus Sanjak of the Greater Erzurum Province. It is noteworthy that the development of Bitlis, which remained as an kaza for more than thirty years, stagnated during this period. To strengthen the dependence of the region on the centre, Bitlis was made a provincial centre on 1 December 1878.

The province of Bitlis, which gained the status of provincial centre, started to develop again, and especially trade and industrial activities gained a new momentum. It is understood that various workshops and commercial establishments operated in almost every part of the province and employed a significant labour force. According to the state yearbook of 1892-1893, there were 1334 shops and stores, 2 merchant baths, 1 casino, 1 pharmacy, 133 mills, 3 oil mills, 6 tanneries, 50 leather dyeing workshops, 14 bakeries, 15 coffee houses, 4 restaurants, 24 madrasahs. There were 53 elementary schools, 9 dervish lodge, 107 mosques and masjids, 15 khans, 1 government mansion, 3 baths, 26 bridges, 13 tombs 3 kühane, 2 slaughterhouses, 1 printing press building, 1 junior high school, 1 national garden and 5 hotels. The population of Bitlis in 1893 was 44109 (Arınç, 1995).

Another traveller who visited the province 30 years after Lynch - after the Ottoman-Russian War - was Albert-Louis Gabriel in 1930. Albert Gabriel was an architect, painter, archaeologist and art historian. He carried out archaeological studies in Greece, Egypt, Türkiye, made research trips to Iraq, Iran and Syria and published many publications.

In *Voyages Archéologiques Dans La Turquie Orientale*, Gabriel (1940) described Bitlis as a settlement extending across a rugged topography shaped by the Bitlis Stream and its tributaries. He emphasized the influence of the valley system on the organization of the urban fabric and noted that the city stretched approximately two kilometres from north to south and one kilometre from east to west. Gabriel also observed the consequences of the Russian occupation of 1914-1918, reporting that both the castle and many residential buildings had suffered considerable damage and that sections of the castle walls were already in a state of deterioration.

According to Gabriel, all the buildings in general are unpretentious, simple but solidly built and only Serefiye Mosque is special. The large walls were built of light red-coloured stones quarried from the surrounding area and covered with soil. The buildings here were constructed for winter and defence. Since the social structure is not developed in terms of artistic and economic aspects, the people are detached and withdrawn from their surroundings. (Gabriel, 1940) (Figure 8).

In historical sources, it is stated that Bitlis was one of the important centres of the Ottoman Empire within the framework of education and culture. In Bitlis, where there are many madrasah buildings, it is known that madrasah education continued to develop from 1200 until the beginning of World War I. Since the number of madrasahs in the province reached up to 24 in some periods, Bitlis is also known as the "province of madrasahs". It is known that with the proclamation of Tanzimat, education in Bitlis gained a different dimension and schools were built in almost every neighbourhood. For example; Bitlis Mülkiye Rüştiyesi was opened in 1890 and Bitlis Military Rüştiyesi was opened in 1894. In 1911, with the opening of Mekteb-i Sultani, a secondary education institution was also opened (Arınç, 1995).

Figure 8.
Map of Bitlis drawn by Gabriel (Gabriel, 1940)



Developments in the last century

The positive cultural and social developments observed in Bitlis continued until the Russian occupation in 1915, and after the Russian occupation, it was observed that the momentum gained within the scope of trade and industry gradually declined over the years. In the first years of the proclamation of the Republic, all the industrial facilities and workshops that increased the labour force in the province were destroyed, looted and ruined. After the Russian occupation, the province, which almost resembled the first settlement periods, experienced the first great wave of migration and has not been able to regain its old identity until today (Arıncı, 1995).

Bitlis Castle, which was built during the Urartian period and forms the backbone of the province, streams, bridges, fountains, stone houses and natural road stairs are complementary elements of the traditional texture of the province (Figures 9, 10).

While the streams passing on both sides of Bitlis Castle are crossed by historical bridges that contribute to the traditional texture in the inner regions, when they reach the province centre, they are crossed by historical and new bridges at closer distances, and a part of the stream passes under the new buildings. The streams and historical bridges provide a harmonious coexistence with the traditional urban fabric of Bitlis. There are 8 registered bridges within the traditional urban fabric of Bitlis. These bridges are Mermutlu Bridge, the bridge in Zeydan neighbourhood, Sapkor Bridge, Pasha Bridge, Montesoglu Bridge, Kalealtı Bridge, Alemdar Bridge and Hatuniye Bridge. Other registered bridges located in the centre of Bitlis are Kanlı bridge, Sindiya bridge and Kışla bridge. After the registered bridges, another type of structure that contributes to the urban fabric is the fountains. There are a total of twenty registered fountains, some of which are integrated with registered buildings and some of which are singular (Oguz, 2011).

Figure 9.
Bitlis. The fortress captured in this photograph by Vartan A. Hampikian. (www.houshamadyan.org)



Figure 10.
1911 View of Bitlis from the bluff on the east side of the river. The fortress is at the right of the picture (URL-2)



In the places outside the main transport axis that divides the traditional urban fabric into two, that is, in the inner parts, there is no vehicle road except for the second-order transport road that provides urban transport. As the topography allows, the connection between the houses is in the form of pedestrian roads consisting of steep stairs and paths. This situation created by vehicle traffic is a gain that prevents the deterioration of the traditional urban texture.

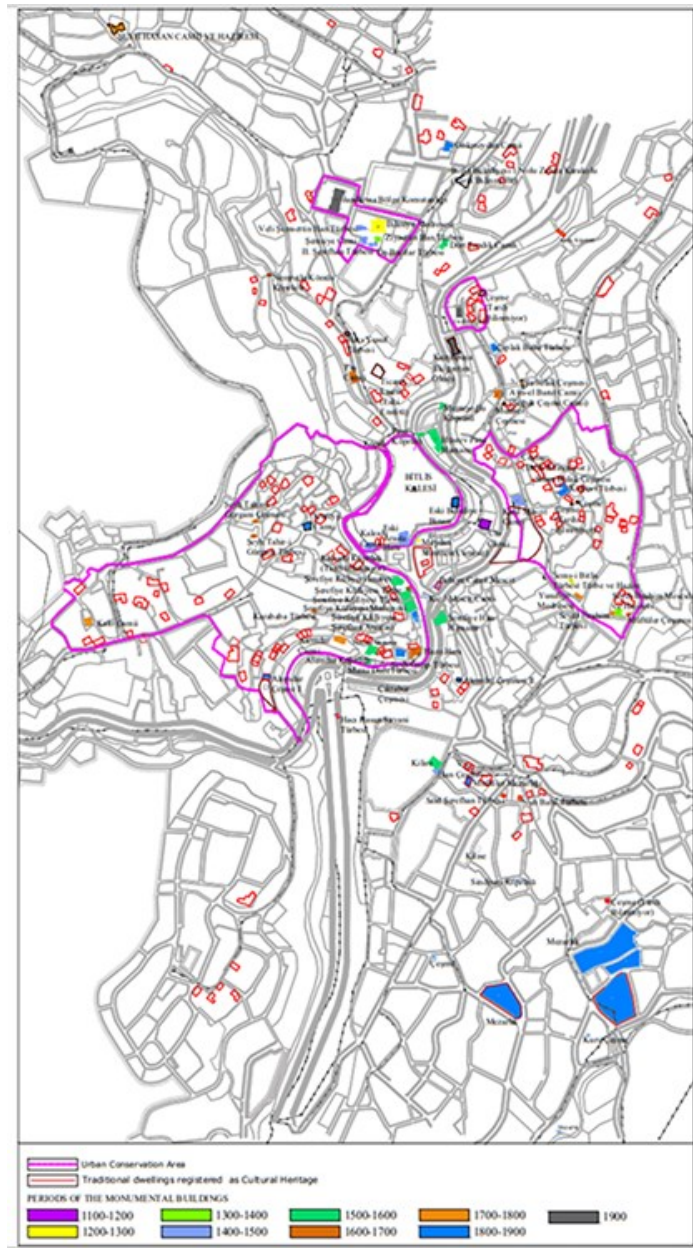
Along with the castle, the monumental architectural examples located in certain parts of the province and the houses mostly belonging to the 18th and 19th centuries, most of which are still in use today, constitute the skeleton of the historical urban fabric. Especially Zeydan, Mustakbaba, İnönü, Tas and Gazibey neighbourhoods draw attention as urban protected areas where historical residences are concentrated. This texture is connected to each other by streets and forms settlement units. Although the original streets have been damaged to a great extent by the introduction of motorised vehicle roads since the mid-20th century, they preserve their original structure in some parts (Bas, 2010). According to the 1998 Bitlis Conservation Plan, there are 280 registered buildings, 198 of which are residential buildings (Figure 11).

Unfortunately, no residential buildings dating back to the 16th century have survived until today. However, as we can observe from the important monumental structures, it is possible to assume that the old residential settlement texture of the

province, whose center has not changed, and the Bitlis settlement texture of today do not differ much from each other. From this point of view, it can be said that the neighborhoods built on the deep valleys and steep slopes formed by the streams by dividing them into parts continued in the past and today (Sayan & Öztürk: 2001).

Figure 11.

Map showing distribution of registered buildings and sites.



Bitlis, which has existed under the sovereignty of different states for centuries; although it has an urban texture bearing the traces of different cultures under its sovereignty, it started to lose its importance after losing its feature of being an important trade routes, which is one of the reasons for being a settlement area. Starting in 1916, the Russian occupation changed the administrative structure of Bitlis. After the proclamation of the Turkish Republic, the first zoning plan that was prepared in 1952 in Bitlis, which was turned into a province in 1935 while it was a kaza of Mus after the proclamation of the Republic (Sönmez, 1996).

With the first years of the Republic, the province of Bitlis started to develop again. In this period, social, cultural and economic factors as well as geographical structure were among the factors affecting the development. The planning process affecting the development of Bitlis started in the 1950s. The first zoning plan of the province was made in 1952 and in this plan, decisions were taken regarding the settlement of the province's commercial centre, administrative centre, education areas and residential areas.

The failure to implement the first zoning plan and the inadequacy of the new development areas led to the necessity of a new zoning plan in 1962. The second zoning plan of the province was finalised in 1966. In this plan, a new administrative centre and a commercial sub-centre were proposed in the north of the province on the Tatvan road. In addition, new settlement areas were proposed around the province, especially on the northwest axis. In the 1960s, a new highway was constructed through the province, but this was seen as an application contrary to the plan and led to changes in the zoning plan.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the urban development of Bitlis in the Republican period stands out as a period in which planning processes played an important role and these plans were revised over time. However, due to factors such as non-implementation of the plans and some highway crossings, plan amendments and updates were needed. Such planning and development processes are important for guiding and regulating the growth and change of a province.

In the 1976 zoning plan, it was envisaged that the province would develop on the northwest-southeast axis. In the south of the province, commercial functions such as terminal, small arts, province park, sports facilities, hal-market, and educational areas and military area were proposed in the north (1998 KAIP Plan Explanation Report). In the first two plans, including the 1966 plan, the province developed in a compact structure, while from the 1976 plan onwards, it has shown a linear development in the northeast-southwest direction (Keles Eriçok, 2022).

In 1998, a zoning plan for the province centre and a conservation zoning plan for protected areas were prepared (1998 KAIP Plan Research Report). Later, 2007 Bitlis Revision and Additional Zoning Plan was prepared. In the process, plan amendments were made in the 2007 plan within the scope of special issues such as official institution area, educational institutions facility area, prison, Bitlis Castle surroundings (Keles Eriçok, 2022).

There are 3 regions in the province macroform. The first one is the historical province centre which contains the traces of the traditional texture. The second region is the newly developed areas in Hüsrevpasa Quarter in the north northeast of the historical province centre. Bitlis State Hospital, public institutions and new residential areas are located in this area. The third one is the newly developed areas in Bes Minare Neighborhoods. In this area, Bitlis Eren University and new residential areas are located. The new centre and development areas in the northeast of the province, which have developed compactly around Bitlis Castle from the past to the present, and the development areas spreading up to Bitlis Eren University have developed disconnected from each other (Keles Eriçok, 2022).

Bitlis has been under the influence of many different civilisations and administrations throughout history. For this reason, the province bears the traces of different periods. Despite

difficult historical events such as occupation and wars, Bitlis has preserved some of its architectural texture and carried this past to the present day. Bitlis Castle is one of the most important structures that constitute the historical core of Bitlis. This castle is located in the centre of the province and forms the basis of the urban fabric with its neighbourhoods and residences around it. The castle emphasises the historical and strategic importance of Bitlis and has become the symbol of the province. The partially preserved architectural texture of Bitlis is an indicator of the province's historical heritage. The preservation of this texture ensures the transfer of historical and cultural values to future generations. It is also important in terms of tourism because historical and aesthetically rich places attract visitors. The urban texture of Bitlis is shaped by the neighbourhoods and residences settled around the castle. The organisation and development of these settlements is important to preserve the historical and cultural identity of the province.

In conclusion, Bitlis is a remarkable province with its partially preserved architectural texture despite historical breaking points, changing administrations and challenging historical events. Having symbolic structures such as Bitlis Castle and the urban fabric shaped around this structure reflect the history and character of the province. It is an important responsibility to protect such historical and cultural heritage and to pass it on to future generations.

Beyond documenting the historical development of Bitlis, this study demonstrates the value of travelers' narratives, historical maps, engravings, and visual records as complementary sources for understanding urban morphology and spatial transformation. By bringing together textual and visual evidence from different periods, the research reconstructs the changing urban form of Bitlis and reveals how geographical features, transportation routes, and socio-political dynamics influenced its spatial development over time.

The study also contributes to the literature on historical urban geography and urban morphology by highlighting the potential of travel accounts as alternative archival sources for reconstructing the evolution of historic cities. In the case of Bitlis, travelers' observations provide insights not only into the physical structure of the city but also into its social life, architectural character, and cultural identity. These sources make it possible to trace both continuity and change within the urban landscape across different historical periods.

Future research may expand this approach by incorporating additional cartographic materials, archival documents, and geospatial analyses to examine the transformation of Bitlis in greater detail. Comparative studies focusing on other historic Anatolian cities described by travelers could also contribute to a broader understanding of the relationship between travel narratives, urban memory, and spatial development.

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